**The ABCs of Judaism**

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Judaism means so much to me both as a religion and as a way of life. This too, has been debated by many philosophers who have argued the topic such as Pirke Avot and Maimonides, to name a few. The most succinct way to articulate the things this seven letter word means is to pen my personal interpretation acrostically. While the immediate incentive is to win the Indian University Hillel’s writing contest, the long term hope is that this ABC way of interpreting Judaism will provide a spring board for future religious studies majors to have a rudimentary modern day interpretation of Judaism from a fellow coed.

***J***: **Judaism**. J stands for Judaism both as a religion and culture. I personally intertwine the two seamlessly into my daily life. I follow kosher dietary laws according to the Bible and Mishnah and often times eat food items that are synonymous with Jewish culture such as bagels, lox, matzah balls and my bubbe’s delicious chocolate chip mandle broit. Another example of this is the cultural verses halachic laws associated with the deceased. I vividly recall a shiva minyan for my grandfather a few years ago. There was an outpouring of friends, fellow congregants and neighbors that steadily streamed into my grandparents small New York City apartment. The community support for the family was amazing and just as the bride and bride groom are not to be alone, so too should we welcome the bereaved into the community. While some noshed on a cookie, others fulfilled the mitzvah of making a minyan which allowed the mourners to fulfill the religious act of the recitation of the Kaddish. While I begin each morning davening and putting on tefillin and follow many, albeit not all 613 commandments, my life as a Jew would not be complete without cultural Jewish things such as food, gifts at Chanukah, and Tikkun Olam or charitable acts of giving or serving to those in need.

***U:* Universal language**. Israel is the only country in which Hebrew is the official language. Yet, I have found it so empowering to have been to China, Hong Kong, France, Ireland and many more countries throughout the world and be able to seamlessly engage with congregational members both in prayer and conversation. Whether Biblical, Mishnaic, Medieval, or Modern, Hebrew is Hebrew. Fluency in reading, writing, listening, and speaking Hebrew not only gives me the ability to converse in Hebrew and understand nearly every Jewish religious text, but also creates a niche for me to conduct professional business with a larger number of clients, in the future.

***D:*** **Debate**. Everything is up for interpretation in Judaism. As a child I thought the only thing that people argued about was the gastronomic pleasures of the hamentaschen over the latke. Now several years later and just a bit wiser, I realize that if we get three people in the room, there will be four opinions. For instance, while Judaism may figuratively been known as the religion, there are many categories of observance that loosely align with one’s affiliation: Reform, conservative, orthodox, reconstructionist, egalitarian, etc….Jewish studies students may also submit that even the origins of the religion may be argued according to the Documentary Hypothesis. Fortunately, unlike one’s parents whose words are divine, Judaism encourages and respects those who debate and find meaning from others.

***A:* Activism**. Throughout our history, Jewish people have stood in solidarity and played an active role in the community. Children learn about Rambam’s eight levels of charitable giving and so they put a few nickels in a container before the Sabbath. This charge carries on in youth groups. More recently, the term tikkun olam has been the buzz word and symbolizes a call to action to serve at soup kitchens, provide emergency funds, or assist the elderly and frail. In general, Jewish people are activists in order to make the world a better place for all!

***I:*** **Israel.** I have had the fortune of visiting Israel, twice in my lifetime. While I think of falafel, Ben Yehuda Street, the Old City, and many more iconic places, nothing connects the significance of Israel and Judaism than my family and I standing on top of a Jerusalem hill a few years ago. Despite chanting the book of Lamentation each year, I never really understood what the Jews experienced as the First Temple fell at the hands of the Babylonians in 586 BCE and the Second Temple to the Romans in 70 CE. On that particular 9th of Av service, as we chanted from Lamentations, I looked out and saw the Western Wall of the Second Temple. I had the experience of praying the afternoon service at the Western Wall the following day. To be praying on the worst day in the history of Judaism at the location where the tragedies occurred was incredibly surreal. It was the most meaningful service I ever prayed and forever reminds me how important this homeland is to the Jewish people.

***S:*** **Sabbath**. The Sabbath is a twenty five hour period of rest from a hectic schedule when I break from studies and focus on the weekly parsha. Self- meditation during the lighting of the candles which symbolizes the ushering in of the holiday provides a time to reflect on the past week’s joys and challenges while the concluding prayer, known as Havdalah offers observers an opportunity to plan for the week ahead. Good food, great conversation, and as a college student the chance to wear my new Nike’s is just part of the joys the Sabbath brings.

***M:* Mishpacha.**  The Hebrew word Mishpacha translates to family in English. Family is the cornerstone of Judaism. We celebrate life cycle events with family. We are always reminded of the central role the family takes in our life each time one is called to the Torah for an honor. Men and women are announced by their Hebrew name immediately followed by the words son/daughter of the names of their father and mother. While my parents and siblings are 251 miles north of Bloomington, I am very comfortable in my newly adopted family at the Indiana University Hillel where I am welcomed just as we welcome the Shabbat bride on Friday night.

For this writer the ability to compartmentalize Judaism as a religion and culture would be very challenging. However, for those with no prior association with the topic, one only need to meander into 730 East Third Street in Bloomington and witness those participating in Sabbath services, charitable projects, P100 classes, or conversations around holiday meals to know that Judaism is rich both as a religion and as a culture and together or independently the small seven letter word, Judaism, can positively complement one’s daily life.